

Interview

DORU POP, interview with **Florin Șerban**,
the director of the movie *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*,
awarded with the Berlin Film Festival's "Alfred Bauer"
Award and "Silver Berlin Bear" in 2009.

Doru Pop: Florin Șerban you are one of the most "recent" addition to the list of young Romanian directors awarded with international prizes. There has been a great debate around the very concept of a "new Romanian cinema". Some have identified it with the generous term "new wave", others were speaking about a "new generation" of cinematographers. Personally, I am interested in the language of these moviemakers, so I suggest we should concentrate the topic of our discussion around these issues: the language of the new generation of Romanian cinematographers and the identity of this "new wave". First of all, how would you describe the concept of "Romanian new wave"? Is there a new wave, or there is not? And if there is, how can we describe the characteristics of such a new wave? How do you

personally integrate in your moviemaking philosophy such a concept?

Florin Șerban: I don't believe that such new wave exists. I think it is an artificial concept, invented by some film critics, particularly by the European film critics, in order to better organize and systematize an existing phenomenon. Otherwise, personally I don't believe that the "new wave" exists because I think that we can talk only about individualities, about moviemakers who create productions that have a different approach at the level of their style, subjects or visual languages. So the only similarities I can see between the movies that were created in the last six or seven years are the following: almost all of them have a good quality acting, and a strong visual language, albeit different from one to another. There is no way I can compare *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days* with *California dreamin'*, and neither of them can be compared with *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, or with any of Corneliu Porumboiu's movies. At least this distinction does not work for me.

Q: It is obvious that this kind of comparison does not work, but what can you say about the very concept of a new generation of cinematographers? Would such a concept work better to explain an explicitly coherent trend in our contemporary cinema?

A: I think this is rather about something else. I am trying to see things in a more pragmatic way. I believe that at some point this “wave” could have happened even a decade ago.

Q: This is quite provocative, but why this explosion of good quality movies didn’t happen at the beginning of the 90s?

A: I think at that time it was almost impossible because the people who were creating cinema at that very moment were coming after years of repressing their expressions, and now they were suddenly in another world, that allowed any kind of expression. The directors could say anything they wanted to, and there were some money on the market so they wanted to say everything, everything that was impossible until then, and in a way it was never been said before. This is why we have the moviemaking of Daneliuc before the Revolution, and Daneliuc the director after the Revolution. Even the great Romanian moviemakers, those who were able to create great cinema during the Communist time, were not able to make equally great movies afterwards. This is why I believe that immediately after the Revolution this trend was not possible. Afterwards, I believe it would have been possible if at the decision-making level,

where the money was distributed, it would have been another policy. I think the trend would have appeared earlier if another policy would have been in place and would have ensured that very thing that happens now – and by this I mean that the money are not supposed to be given away for non-artistic reasons, for favors, friendships and such other criteria.

Q: Obviously, the non-aesthetic criteria in distributing money continue right now and the financial explanation does not cover the artistic changes. In a sense how would you characterize the cinema made before 1989, since there is an obvious difference between everything that the Romanian cinema was previously, related to the way the contemporary moviemakers understand cinema as a practice?

A: Personally I think it is difficult to create such a separation. There are movies, as in the case of *Reconstituirea* (1968), for example, which I believe are important for the entire Romanian cinema, movies that are forgotten or even shunned in a mistaken manner – although *Reconstituirea* was never totally forgotten. But there are many movies which deserve a better fate. So I appreciate them as an artistic product, but I find it hard to resonate with them as an artist myself, and if I were to discuss my relationship with these movies, I could hardly say if there is any link between what I am doing right now, and what used to be done in the Romanian cinema. I think that such a question would better be addressed by a film critic or a film historian, who have the instruments and the critical devices to compare the two.

Otherwise, I like to think that, and it is more than what I like, it is something I do, when I have a story that I want to share with others I am trying to express it as well as I can, but for me cinema is strictly about the story. My movie, *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*, looks the way it does because I thought this was the best form to deliver the particular message. My graduation movie in the United States was, on the other hand, a very, very slow movie, with very little camera movements. That was what I thought is the best means to present that particular story at that time. I don't see this as a problem. There are some great directors – and I don't consider myself a great director, I am just a director who made one film until now – who have their own personal style. You can see only a couple of frames from a motion picture and you know “it is a Kubrick”. I am not at that moment in my career, and I cannot think this way right now.

Q: Still, there is no doubt that *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* was a changing moment in the Romanian cinema, the “new Cinema” – so to say – was in a decline, no cinematographers obtained any relevant prizes during that year. So, personally, I believe that *If I Want to Whistle...* represented a changing moment, which helped reinvigorate a phenomenon that began in 2005 with Cristi Puiu's prize at Cannes. In this sense, do you believe that your movie is relevant in the general debate about the contemporary Romanian moviemaking, do you see yourself as a part of the “new” generation, or this is not something you do not ponder upon?

A: First I have to say that such an comparison is honoring, since all these moviemakers, Cristian Mungiu, and Cristi Puiu, and Porumboiu, and Mitulescu and Muntean are very good directors and they have creating movies that I personally and sincerely admire. In this respect such an association honors me deeply. Otherwise and beyond this, it is hard for me to find any links between me and these other movies. Sure, I watched all the Romanian movies that were made after 2000, and even those who came before that, but there is no moment in time when I can recollect myself saying: “I want to make a movie in the way Mungiu did it, or in the way Cristi Puiu or Porumboiu have done it”.

Q: So we can not speak about an emulation of a whole generation?

A: There is no way for such a thing, definitely! And there is another aspect to be addressed, unlike other cinematographic currents, or waves, or little waves, it does not matter how we call them, but in most of cases there were programs or people who were systematically and programmatically describing the rules of those currents, as it was the case of *Dogma 95*, when people accepted the rules and worked according to those rules. Even in the French new wave, there were written or unwritten rules to be followed. Unlike them, in our case there was no such a thing. Maybe around Mungiu there is a kind of group, or it was at some point some sort of a group, when they worked for his project *Tales from the Golden age*. Yet this was only an attempt, otherwise it is difficult to find evidence for a grouping

cohesion, we are really not connected by anything. We know each other, we may be friends with each other, but that's all!

Q: Yet one can use your own example as a counter-argument here. You worked closely with Mitulescu, and now he announced a movie of his own (*Loverboy*) casting the same actors who were the main characters in your movie. So there is a kind of generation solidarity and collaboration?

A: I believe that this is the only example in this sense. Cristi Puiu is producing his own movies, Mungiu is producing his own movies, Porumboiu is producing his own movies, Radu Muntean works with only one production house, that doesn't belong to any of us.

Q: But talking about production companies, the fact that all of the young directors are creating their own production houses cannot be seen as an indication with a wider implication?

A: I think that in my case, with Cătălin Mitulescu, it is a singular collaboration at the level of artistic production in our industry, and it is based on other criteria than the simple fact that we decided: "So here is the movie I made, then I want you to make another movie, similar to mine!"

Q: I would like to add in our discussions the concept of realism, rather than concept of minimalist realism. How would you describe the fact that your movie and the following movies I am sure you are going to make and the movies made before you, can be linked to this type of aesthetics?

A: Believe me, there is no connection here. If I would have thought that the

story could have been better said in another style, I would not have hesitated to work in a different manner. Otherwise, I don't know if the comparisons I can make are objective enough, although when I'm trying to evaluate my work with respect to other movies, I believe there is significant difference. Personally, I find it hard to state what helped me by studying in the United States or in Romania. This does not mean that those schools helped me or they didn't help me, now it is hard to make a distinction and to state that one school has influenced me in this way, and the other has influenced me in another way. But I am inclined to think that, in terms of screenwriting and of narrative formula, my movie is rather classical – and by classic all I mean it is using the American model – rather than other movies of the same generation. The other movies we are talking about are much more courageous in terms of screenwriting, in terms of their dramaturgy. My movie is rather "safe" in terms of screenwriting, and by this I mean that it is a very clear story: there is a boy who wants something, who goes in that direction, faces an obstacle, tries to go beyond that obstacle and after that there is a bigger obstacle, and so on.

Q: So you are purposefully using a classical American screenwriting formula?

A: Yes, indeed! The story has not only a narrative arch, but also has a character arch, my character ends up by understanding something. And by this I mean it is according to the classical narrative, learning from the model of the "classical" American screenwriting.

This doesn't mean that we are talking about a good or a bad thing – it simply works this way for me. I believe in this formula, not because it was developed in the American filmmaking, but because it comes from 2000 years ago, starting with Aristotle, it is the same story structure. In the meantime, the other Romanian movies are much more courageous in this respect.

Q: But don't you think that this courage can be explained as a programmatic statement?

A: Of course it can. I mean Cristi Puiu's movie, *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* has a strong formula and a hard approach, without any complacency and without making any compromises with the public or with what it is considered to be the desire or the expectation of this public. His movie says: "No, this is my movie and I want to present it the way I want it to be".

Q: And now with *Aurora*, this attitude goes beyond any complacency!

A: *Aurora* is undoubtedly following the same logic indeed.

Q: How do you think the Romanian cinema is going to evolve in the following five years?

A: This is a very difficult question to address!

Q: Then how would you like it to look like in the future?

A: As far as I am concerned, I would like the Romanian cinema to follow up a development course that will take us to the moment when the Romanian public is going to watch Romanian movies in

Romanian movie theaters. Personally I think of myself rather as a storyteller than a moviemaker, and if I don't have a public in the cinema room, somebody to listen to my story, then this means I didn't do my job properly. I am happy that my movie, *If I want to Whistle I Whistle* was well received by the public, and I would love to see the Romanian cinema going beyond international prizes and applause, to the moment when a Romanian audience fills the movie theaters at home. In terms of their numbers, well this is a very relative thing. There is piracy, there are a lot of other aspects to be taken into account, but I believe that there is a Romanian audience for the Romanian cinema and this is what must be achieved, and this is what I would love to see in the near future.

Q: In terms of future projects, what can you tell us something about them? Is there anything developing right now?

A: Yes, I am working on a screenplay right now. In terms of more general projects I am focusing on one very particular thing, I am developing an acting school for nonprofessionals, a school that was recently opened, and where I am trying to get involved as much as I can.

Q: Where is this school functioning?

A: It was opened in Bucharest, and it was created there because I love very much this part of the world and because it is a place where I can find and choose my future collaborators, and also it is a place which I can use as a laboratory for my future products, like a laboratory for my own screenplays. I can say that I

am working on a screenplay while I am doing the workshop. Basically these are my key projects, the acting school and the following movie, which will be a love story.

Q: This is also going to be a “realistic” story?

A: Yes, I would find it hard to make a horror movie, for example. I don’t know if I can make a comedy and I’m sure that I would like to make a historical movie, but I am not at that point in my career, so my options are limited. I cannot make sci-fi movies, nor fantastic movies like *Amélie*, thus I am constrained to some specific genre.

Q: I would like us to return to your passion for working with nonprofessionals, in the context where other authors, like Cristi Puiu, who self-distributed himself in *Aurora*, are following a similar path. Can we talk about a repetitive pattern here? The fact that contemporary Romanian directors share a certain distrust towards professional actors is a trait?

A: I don’t think that there is such a distrust, so I cannot discuss the reasons of other directors.

Q: Puiu explained that he couldn’t find an actor able to play this role.

A: It might be true, this is very possible, I don’t see any reasons why this should not be true enough. The reasons why I chose to work with nonprofessionals in *If I want to Whistle...* are purely artistic, and they do not belong to any sort of programmatic manifest or to any artistic orientation. These reasons are very clear

to me: I did not want to make a jail movie, the penitentiary was only a background, like a canvas to place the story of the kid, who was more interesting to me. Yet the jail did not have a dramatic consistence in the screenwriting, in terms of gang fights, competition and other similar aspects, so it had to be present, but without having it “talk”. So I needed something more powerful visually, and those faces were unrepeatable, and some of them, indeed, had lines in the movie, and I worked with them along those dialogues, and this was the reason why I chose to work with the guys in the penitentiary. I don’t believe that nonprofessional actors are a solution for cinema, not by far. I mean, there are certain roles that can be undertaken by a nonprofessional: the role of the mother, on the other hand, I could not have found a lady who was in that situation or has been in a similar situation, even if she would have lived that, she could not have played it as I wanted. There is no way to do so, because in that role I needed an actor who was able to give the right dosage and who could increase or decrease the tension. And for this it takes a good actor. So this specific role could not have been done by a nonprofessional. I think that nonprofessionals offer a certain quality, and this is not only our case, this goes on for decades in France, for example, where they work with nonprofessionals. Yet this has moved in the direction of, how shall I put it, we like it or not, our personal history is written on our faces and a face can say, sometimes, more than ten pages in a screenplay. In an approach

where the dialogue is left somewhere in the background, you need a face to tell a story, or that face cannot come from an actor, an actor can enrich the universe of a character, but – we have to be realistic about this – this same actor is always a person who has gone through some life experiences that are “readable” on his face. And this is why I believe some directors prefer to manifest themselves in the area of nonprofessional acting.

Q: I was wondering if there are any connections with the Italian neo-realism?

A: There are several connections, but personally I don't think that working with nonprofessional actors can be an option. It is a solution only for certain roles and for certain movies.

Q: If you were to integrate the contemporary Romanian cinema, the movies made after 2005, in an international context, and specifically in the European cinema, where would you place it and how would you describe it? Your movie included, of course!

A: I believe that at this point in time, or rather two or three years ago, we could have considered the Romanian cinema as one of the most interesting cinemas in contemporary moviemaking and, probably, and maybe this could be an overstatement, the most interesting European cinema. This is not a mathematical evaluation, but I don't think there are many cinema industries that can count over a period of five years the same amount of prizes that the Romanian cinema boasts with. And we are not talking

only about one director, as for example was the case in the former Yugoslavia, where Kusturica exploded brilliantly at some point, and took prize after prize, some of them the most important in the moviemaking industry. But he was one man, and his success did not repeat. This is why I believe that, when I'm talking about the Romanian cinema, from my personal standpoint, not from the viewpoint of a particular director, it is a phenomenon that was and continues to be one of the most interesting cinematographic phenomena for audiences worldwide.

Q: How would you describe the main quality of these movies? Why do you think *If I Want to Whistle...* received the prize before other movies?

A: I find it hard to explain this myself!

Q: Then, why do you think Cristi Puiu's movie was awarded from among so many other movies?

A: It is also hard to say, since these decisions depend on many variables that are not quantifiable. Sometimes the competition in film festivals is different from the competition on the market.

Q: Then the critics are correct to say that the Romanian cinema is a “festival” cinema?

A: I cannot speak for others, I can only speak for myself. My movie was developed from the very beginning, when I received the screenplay from Cătălin (Mitulescu), as a production designed for the national market. We were discussing about making “a Romanian movie for the Romanian audience”. And this was clear

from the very beginning. I am happy that we received an international prize, but this was never our purpose, our intention was to bring the Romanian public to cinema.

Q: We should conclude our discussion on this optimistic note and let us hope that the Romanian cinema will be successful not only in festivals, but also in the local “box office”.